



# PAYING HOMAGE

E30 M3 owners and fans gather at SIGFest in New Jersey, and the convertibles are the stars of the show.

By David Haueter Photography by David Haueter

When the original E30 M3 burst onto the scene, it immediately earned cult-car status for the purity of its driving dynamics. Twenty-five years later, the fascination continues.

Though the cars are becoming more rare on the road as they get older, the E30 M3 SIGFest (for Special Interest Group) manages to gather quite a few in one place. The event has taken place in New Jersey every year since 1999, and this year saw 42 E30 M3s in attendance. The most interesting of those were undoubtedly the four original convertibles that sat together with their tops down.

The E30 M3 convertible was produced in small numbers—just 786 in total, according to

the BMW M Registry—from 1988 through 1991. Since it was never sold in the U.S., it's highly unusual to see any of these cars here, let alone four in one place and in great condition.

Oscar Benitez made the longest journey to SIGFest, driving his Misano Red 1989 model from Virginia for the event. Benitez' car is all original and nearly perfect, with only around 50,000 miles on the odometer.

"I found the car in the U.K. and started negotiations to buy it in December 2009," Benitez says. "I was finally able to acquire it in August 2010. I have a couple of other E30 M3s and really wanted one of the convertibles, so this kind of completes my E30 M3 collection."

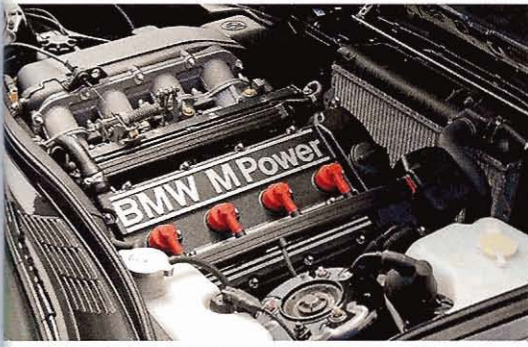
Gathering 42 E30 M3s in one place is quite a feat, and it's even more impressive when four are E30 M3 convertibles in pristine condition, as owned by Mike Gallino, Phil Cataldi, James Liu and Oscar Benitez (above, from left). M3s from Stephen Valeski and Gary Bossert replicate Jägermeister, Schnitzer racing livery. Nearly all M3s on hand sported at least some mods.

Phil Cataldi drove his own 1989 convertible—nearly a twin of Benitez' car—from Maryland. It's still wearing the original Misano Red paint and M Technic rear wing, though the cloth centers on the seats and the convertible top have been replaced.

"In 1998, I bought a new Z3 and liked it because it was a convertible and a BMW, but it didn't have enough power and wasn't raw enough for me," says Cataldi. "I had driven some E30 M3 coupes but really wanted a convertible, though it was kind of a challenge to find one."

Cataldi found his car in Switzerland in 1999 and got it through the Federalization process in June 2000.





"In 11 years of ownership, I've put about 18,000 miles on it" he says. "I used to drive it more, but as it gets older and the value goes up, I feel kind of bad about driving it much!"

James Liu's Nogar Silver 1989 convertible shares his garage with two E30 M3 coupes. He bought the car from a collector living on the German/Dutch border and had it delivered to the U.S. in August 2002. Though the Federalization process usually takes about 90 days, it took until June 2003 for Liu's M3 to get through.

"Ferrari North America was sung the Department of Transportation at the time for an issue with the grey market importation of cars," he says. "It basically halted all of the cars coming into the U.S. at that time."

Liu's car is all original except for its headlight wipers, smoked headlamps and newer wheels, which he added.

"I love the E30 M3, and it's always been the passion car for me," says Liu. "I only put about 2,000 miles a year on the convertible, mostly to shows or on fun drives. It's definitely more of a cruiser than the coupe, but you can hear the motor music better with the top down!"

Mike Gallino's blue-green over white 1991 M3 convertible looked and smelled like it just drove off the showroom floor, but it wasn't that way when he bought it

"I found this car in Germany and it turned out to be a BMW Individual car and one of the last six convertibles ever built," says Gallino. "When I realized that, I knew it was the car I was waiting for. The car was in horrendous condition, but I still wanted it"

Gallino convinced BMW Individual in Germany to do most of the interior restoration, and he spent many days taking care of the rest himself. His efforts restored the car to basically as-new condition, earning not only "Best of Show" at SIGFest but also the trophy for "Best German Touring Car" at the prestigious Greenwich Concours in Connecticut.

In addition to the convertibles, plenty of other cool M3s turned up at SIGFest Gary Bossert brought his BMW CCA Club Racing 1988 M3 with graphics that mimic the BMW Original Parts livery made famous on the Schnitzer 635CSi that raced in Europe in the mid-1980s. Bossert's M3 won awards for "Best Tribute" and "People's Choice."

Also popular with attendees was Chet

Marfaba's Brilliant Red 1990 M3 Sport Evolution, one of only 600 made. In 1995, Marfata became the second owner of this most sought-after of M3s when he acquired it from the original owner, who imported it to the U.S. from Italy when he moved here to work in Boston. Having covered a mere 60,000 miles, Marfata's rare M3 won the SIGMeister's Choice award at SIGFest.

Nearly everyone who brought a car to SIGFest had done something to make the car uniquely theirs. It was hard to find an M3 without at least one modification under its hood or in the cockpit, and the mods ranged from simple things like different seats or steering wheels to more complicated alterations like six-cylinder engine transplants. Regardless of their stance on originality or modification, everyone who brought a car to SIGFest was united in their passion for this charismatic BMW.

Pride of ownership and camaraderie are common to M3 owners of every generation, but those lucky enough to own an E30 M3 experience this in spades. The model continues to evolve, but no M3 will ever be quite like the original. 🏁